

PUBLIC INFORMATION STATEMENT
NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE RALEIGH NC
700 AM EDT MON JUN 23 2008

LIGHTNING AND LIGHTNING SAFETY--AN INTRODUCTION

In the United States, there are an estimated 25 million cloud-to-ground lightning flashes each year. While lightning can be fascinating to watch, it is also extremely dangerous. Each one of those 25 million flashes is a potential killer. During the past 30 years, lightning has killed an average of 73 people per year in the United States based on documented cases. This is more than the average of 68 deaths per year caused by tornadoes and more than the average of 16 deaths per year caused by hurricanes. However, because lightning usually claims only one or two victims at a time, and because lightning does not cause the mass destruction left in the wake of tornadoes or hurricanes, lightning generally receives much less attention than the more destructive storm-related killers. Documented lightning injuries in the United States average about 300 per year; however, undocumented injuries caused by lightning are likely much higher.

While many people think they are aware of the dangers of lightning, the vast majority are not. This lack of understanding with regard to the dangers of lightning continues to be a significant problem in the United States. Many people don't act to protect their lives, their property, and the lives of others in a timely manner simply because they don't understand all the dangers associated with thunderstorms and lightning. This lack of knowledge can lead to very tragic consequences.

Education and awareness are keys to reducing the number of people struck by lightning. People need to become aware of the type of behavior that puts them at a greater risk of being struck by lightning, and what they can do to reduce that risk. Adults in charge of outdoor activities and events, particularly those that involve children, should have and follow a specific lightning safety plan so that they minimize the dangers of lightning for the participants and spectators.

The greatest number of lightning deaths and injuries in the United States occurs during the summer months when the combination of lightning and outdoor summertime activities reaches a peak. During the summer, people take advantage of the warm weather to enjoy a multitude of outdoor recreational activities. Unfortunately, those outdoor recreational activities put them at greater risk of being struck by lightning.

While virtually all people take some protective actions during the most dangerous part of thunderstorms, many leave themselves vulnerable to being struck by lightning as thunderstorms approach, depart, or are nearby. Lightning can strike as much as 10 miles or more away from the rain area of a thunderstorm; that's about the distance that you can hear the thunder from the storm. In some instances when a storm is ten miles away, it may even be difficult to tell that a storm is nearby. However, IF YOU HEAR THE THUNDER, CHANCES ARE THAT YOU ARE WITHIN STRIKING DISTANCE OF THAT STORM.

Inside homes, people must also avoid activities which put their lives at risk from a possible lightning strike. In particular, people should stay away from windows and doors and avoid contact with anything that conducts electricity. People may also want to take certain actions WELL BEFORE the storm threatens, in order to protect property within their homes, such as electronic equipment.

Finally, in the unfortunate event that a person is struck by lightning, medical care may be needed immediately to save the person's life. Cardiac arrest and irregularities, burns, and nerve damage are common in cases where people are struck by lightning. However, with proper treatment, including CPR if necessary, most victims survive a lightning strike, although the long-term effects on their lives and the lives of family members can be devastating.

LIGHTNING FACT FOR THE DAY: Most lightning deaths occur during the summer months, and during the late afternoon and evening. These are the times when lightning is most likely to occur and when people are more likely to be caught out-of-doors.

LIGHTNING QUESTION OF THE DAY: What are the chances that a person will be struck by lightning during his or her lifetime.

Answer: Based on documented cases of lightning deaths and injuries, the nationwide odds of being killed or injured by lightning are about 1 in 700,000 for each year of your life. Assuming a life span of 80 years, that's lifetime odds of more than 1 in 9000. These odds are based on documented cases only and would likely be higher if all lightning strike cases were documented. Keep in mind, though, that your behavior around thunderstorms will determine your individual odds. If you are aware of all the threats posed by lightning and act accordingly, your chances for being struck by lightning will be considerably lower. On the other hand, if you are not aware of those dangers or don't take the appropriate safety precautions, your odds of being struck by lightning will be higher.

Here's a list of topics to be covered later this week:

TUESDAY - The Science of Thunderstorms and Lightning

WEDNESDAY - Outdoor Safety

THURSDAY - Safe Shelters and Indoor Safety.

FRIDAY - The Facts About Lightning Strike Victims

For additional information about lightning or lightning safety, visit NOAA's Lightning Safety Awareness web site at:

<http://www.lightningsafety.noaa.gov>